

Churchill Grounds expands its jazz sound

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Atlanta's premier jazz club just got better.

Churchill Grounds in Midtown's historic Fox Theatre building expanded this month, opening a cocktail lounge-style room next-door to the bar, which first opened in 1997. The club now takes up two Peachtree Street storefronts in the theater building. Jazz bands perform on a high stage in the new, larger room, away from the bar noise.

In just six years, with no advertising the club has built a word-of-mouth reputation for showcasing the best local jazz. With the new space, which increases capacity from 50 to more than 100 patrons, the owners hope to bring more national acts to the still intimate space.

"It will allow us to get bigger names," club co-owner Chris Dean said.

The expansion is not only a plus for jazz fans, but for the Fox Theatre, which lost the Atlanta Opera this year to the Civic Center. While the club is a separate business from the theater, it leases its space from the Fox.

"We get full use of our rental spaces on Peachtree Street," Fox general manager Edgar Neiss said. "It adds additional revenue in terms of rental."

Neiss sees the jazz club as a complement to the theater, which offers concerts, plays and a summer film series.

"There's an obvious synergy in the fact that we're an entertainment facility and they're a jazz club," Neiss said. "They seem to now be the premier jazz club in Atlanta, and we like that association."

The owners of Churchill Grounds also displayed a respect for the beloved Fox building in the way they renovated the new space. The decor is in keeping with the Moorish architecture that makes the Fox special.

"All these archways are original,"

Dean said. "These columns are original. We retained all the original moldings."

The Moorish touches and small, round tables for two give the place an atmosphere reminiscent of Rick's Cafe in the film classic "Casablanca."

"We did without a stage for about a year," partner Sam Yi said.

In the old days the club's original piano player, Johnny O'Neal, got a cold blast of air every time the door opened on a winter night. He also had to play over the noise of the bar. The owners had to enforce a "shush" policy and instruct the staff not to run the

cappuccino machine during the quiet parts.

"No steaming during the bass solo," Dean said.

Now the bar patrons can have their conversations, and the quiet policy is enforced in the music room, he said. The new room also is non-smoking, except for at a small secondary bar in the back.

"That, the vocalists will really love," Dean said.

The bigger space won't change the club's mission to provide straight-up jazz, he said, and even with the hoped-for bigger names there will still be a place for the top local players.

"The Tuesday night jam session has become kind of an institution," Dean said. "We can't change that."

Yi, who is not big on publicity, is a die-hard jazz purist. For him, staying low-key, supporting talented players and catering to true fans of the genre are all part of the club's formula for success.

"I think the musicians realize that we're really about the music," Yi said. "We're really passionate about this art form. Word of mouth spreads. Whoever is in town as a jazz musician will always come here. If you don't have the right musicians and musicians don't think your place is hip, they're not going to come."